"Yes, James?"

"If it pleases you, I have a request."

"Speak, then."

"It's...well, it's a secret, a surprise for you. May I tell Lord Serret?"

"You may." Spock smiled indulgently and stepped aside as Kirk whispered something to the goldsmith. Curiosity burned in him as the Human reached inside his tunic and handed something to the Vulcan.

"Well, now, an unusual request, but it can be done. Spock, your slave is something of a romantic. His surprise will please you, I think. The collar will be delivered this evening without fail."

"Again, my thanks."

"None are necessary. It is a pleasure to create beauty to adorn beauty. Live long, Spock, and honor to your House."

"What was that all about?" Spock asked as the door closed behind the craftsman.

Kirk smiled secretively. "If my lord yould restrain his curiosity until this evening?"

Spock nodded. "Very will, Jim. Now, I suppose I must change. I have never cared for these lengthy affairs, but it is expected."

The day dragged endlessly as the members of Spock's family and his many friends came to congratulate him. It was unusual, and the highest honor, for a novice warrior to be chosen for a war band before his final initiation. Kirk found that he was treated with a little more regard by the free Vulcans, a pleasure slave, however beautiful, was valued for only one reason, but a fighting slave had proved his worth as a man, something this fiercely-proud people could respect. Even Sarek spoke to him with gruff kindness, wishing him success in the campaign ahead.

Only one think marred Kirk's happiness. He had looked forward to some time alone with his lord, but now they would be expected to join the war band. It was Selon who relieved his disappointment.

"Spock, it may please you to know that Satak, too, joins our band. Tomorrow I ride to oversee his testing and initiation. You will have ten days before my return."

"As you command, Selon," Spock replied formally, but his eyes met Kirk's with anticipation, and a delight that matched the Human's.

Some time later Kirk was sitting at Spock's feet while he spoke with his father.

"Father, may I request your assistance?"

"Ask, my son."

"I require a slave, would you purchase one for me and have him trained?" Kirk stiffened and felt Spock's hand press his shoulder reassuringly.

"Gladly, Spock. What precisely do you require?"

"If James is to serve me both in bed and in battle, I do not wish him exhausted with menial tasks. Find me a work slave--a castrate--to perform such duties."

"Well thought, my son. It is not fitting that your fighting slave prepare food and wash clothes I will see to it."

"Thank you, father." As Sarek moved away Spock leaned down to offer an explanation. "In camp there are general slaves for such tasks, but in the field each warrior's slave is solely responsible for his master's tent. A pleasure slave might act as a servant, but I wish you to concentrate on satisfying my...personal requirements."

"As my lord commands," Kirk promised demurely, laughter in his eyes.

At last the guests began to leave and Kirk and Spock were free to return to Spock's rooms.

Closing the door, Spock sighed with satisfaction. "We have ten days. I intend to make the most of them."

"So do I." Kirk was already removing his tunic, and the Vulcan watched appreciatively as the perfect body was revealed in the lamplight. "Look, Serret has delivered my new collar."

"A moment, Jim." Spock's voice halted Kirk as he was about to pick up the box. "First, there is something I must do. Kneel before me."

Kirk knelt, and Spock's hands touched his collar. There was a sharp click. The heavy metal band fell away, and Spock lifted him to his feet, examining his neck critically.

"The scars will fade," he announced at last, and leaned forward to press his lips to the angry red marks. Then drawing away, he pulled off his clothes and stood naked, his hands on Kirk's shoulders.

"Jim, I spoke of the warrior's oath. Will you swear it now with me?"

"I will."

"Then repeat my words." He led Kirk's hands to his face, and took the Human's between his own, then in a low voice, he said deliberately, "James Kirk, I take you as my sole mate, my life's companion. My sword will be your shield, your honor as my own, and my mind and body I give into your hands. As I claim you, so will I keep you, mine alone through life and death, and at life's close I will not part from you. As I have said, let it be."

As the Vulcan spoke, Kirk felt a strange, welcome intrusion deep in his mind as...something... entered and settled, establishing a warm, beloved presence that he greeted eagerly. Then, repeating his lover's words, he was aware that part of himself flowed outwards, to be led into the Vulcan's mind and welcomed as a long-awaited guest.

Spock then picked up a knife from the table and made a shallow cut in his shoulder.

"Taste my blood," he murmured, "and become flesh of my flesh, my brother in spirit."

His hands rose, pulling Kirk's head down so that the Human's lips pressed against the bleeding would. Kirk sucked gently, feeling Spock's hands stroke his hair as the hot, bitter fluid filled his mouth. His tongue caressed the open flesh, and through the mind link he experienced Spock's pleasure at the contact. Raising his head at last, he licked the blood from his lips and smiled confidently at Spock as the Vulcan made a careful incision in his own flesh. He clung to the strong shoulders as